



Saudi Arabia's Strategic Vision

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INTRODUCTION

In March 2023, two men stood shaking hands in front of a blinding array of flashing cameras while the international community—and especially observers from across the Middle East—watched in disbelief at their unlikely meeting. Videos captured the previously unimaginable scene of Ali Shamkhani, the secretary of the Supreme National Security Council of Iran, smiling alongside Musaad bin Mohammed al-Aiban, Saudi Arabia's national security adviser. The adversaries had just agreed to restore diplomatic relations, de-escalating regional tensions that had been brewing since the two countries severed ties in 2016, when demonstrators stormed the Saudi embassy in Tehran to protest Riyadh's execution of a prominent Shia Muslim cleric.

Notably, some onlookers did not think the rapprochement was the most surprising aspect of the press conference. For many, the deal was the natural culmination of years of negotiations between Saudi Arabia and Iran. Instead, these observers were stunned by the nationality of the man who Saudi Arabia asked to mediate the deal. He stood just behind the pair, in front of a flag with 5 stars—not 50. China's top-ranking diplomatic official, Wang Yi, heralded in the new era of regional peace. U.S. officials were nowhere to be found.

From an outsider's perspective, this China-brokered deal may seem like an example of Saudi Arabia's dependence on great powers. After all, the kingdom historically relied on foreign actors to protect its insecure regime. Even before 1932, the Ottomans shielded Arabia from Portuguese incursions in the Hijaz and Persian influence in al-Hasa.¹ After the modern Kingdom of Saudi Arabia was established in the twentieth century, Great Britain and the United States played pivotal roles in safeguarding the regime from foreign invasions and internal revolutions, whether sponsored by Gamal Abdel Nasser's Egypt, Saddam Hussein's Iraq, or Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini's Islamic Republic of Iran.

By pushing China to play a mediating role in its détente with Iran, however, Saudi Arabia demonstrated its willingness to diversify its key relationships beyond the United States. Having witnessed the limits of great power commitment to the region, Saudi leaders believe that the kingdom is capable and deserving of more than it has received from its international relationships in the past. Empowered by its immense oil wealth and leadership roles in multilateral forums, Saudi Arabia now seeks to operate from a position of strength, not insecurity.

More than any of his predecessors, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (MBS) embodies Saudi aspirations.

Through his Vision 2030 plan, he aims to diversify not just the Saudi economy but also the country's diplomatic relationships. With an ambitious leader at the helm, Saudi Arabia is redefining what it means to balance between great powers in an increasingly multipolar international system. Its strategic vision of self-reliance, regional leadership, and partnerships across the Global South aim to establish the kingdom as a key player in the global order.

HISTORY, GRIEVANCES, AND ASPIRATIONS

The Saudi regime has long been driven by a pervasive sense of insecurity, a sentiment deeply rooted in the kingdom's pre-modern history. For centuries, shifting loyalties and territorial competition defined the Arabian Peninsula. Political leaders relied on tribes to conduct military campaigns, creating a system of ad hoc alliances.² King Abdulaziz bin Abdul Rahman Al Saud was modern Saudi Arabia's first leader. His ancestors had failed twice at creating a durable state, and he understood the challenges of establishing dominance over the vast kingdom. Even after 1932, his nascent regime lacked the financial resources to establish a monopoly of violence, reinforcing the insecurity that would define Saudi foreign policy for the next eight decades.³

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Saudi Arabia's insecurity—especially prior to the discovery of oil—motivated its dependence on great powers. Ibn Saud formalized his relationship with Great Britain in the 1915 Treaty of Darin, a bilateral agreement in which Great Britain provided Ibn Saud with an annual subsidy, ammunition, and weapons to help him expand—and protect—his reign.⁴ Yet, the Al Saud ruling family distrusted Britain and sometimes felt encircled by British allies. The prospect of a U.S. relationship—which would provide refuge from the “imperialistic reputation” of the

United Kingdom while ensuring U.S. security support, as well as badly needed expertise—was deeply attractive.⁵ This culminated symbolically in February 1945, when President Franklin D. Roosevelt and King Ibn Saud met aboard the USS Quincy in the Great Bitter Lake of the Suez Canal. It was the first face-to-face meeting between a U.S. president and a Saudi king and laid the foundations for the U.S.-Saudi partnership.⁶ In 1951, the Al Saud signed a mutual defense assistance agreement with the United States, cementing Riyadh's reliance on a powerful ally to mitigate external and internal threats.⁷ That partnership has remained central to Saudi Arabian security thinking for three-quarters of a century, despite a series of crises and an even longer series of stresses. In recent years, however, Saudi Arabia increasingly shows signs that it believes it is deserving—and capable—of more than it has received from its great power relationships.

While MBS values a positive relationship with Washington, Saudi Arabia has shown a growing willingness to prioritize its national interests over its historical allegiances. In addition to pushing for China's mediating role in the Iran-Saudi deal, Riyadh sometimes has collaborated with Moscow at the expense of U.S. interests.⁸ For example, in October 2022, Saudi Arabia agreed with Russia to slash oil production by 2 million barrels per day despite pleas from high-ranking U.S. officials to maintain oil production levels. The Biden administration interpreted the move not only as a betrayal but also as an effort to hurt President Biden before midterm elections, as well as a push to boost the Russian economy at a time when Russia's invasion of Ukraine had pushed even China and India to distance themselves from Moscow.⁹ In the aftermath, Biden's threatened retaliation never materialized, and Saudi Arabia's star rose as both the de facto leader of OPEC+ and the only Arab country in the G20.¹⁰ One interpretation is that Saudi Arabia was able to demonstrate that it is too economically and geopolitically vital to isolate. That freed the country to pursue a more ambitious and independent foreign policy.

For much of the twentieth century, Saudi Arabia's foreign policy was conservative and predictable. In the last decade, however, the country has shown an increased appetite for risk, as evidenced by its military intervention in Yemen and its blockade of Qatar. The kingdom's leaders portray recent efforts to mend fences with Iran, a long-standing rival, as anything but a sign of weakness.

Rather, Riyadh seeks to herald a new era on its own terms. Saudi Arabia clearly articulates its aspirations in Vision 2030, the country's strategic plan, which aims to reduce Saudi Arabia's economic reliance on hydrocarbons, mitigate regional instability, and broaden its international relationships. For the first time since its founding, the kingdom is motivated by ambition—not fear.

NATIONAL DEBATE

The Saudi government has been wary of open debate on public policy issues from the beginning. It has relied on complementary strategies of cooptation and coercion for almost a century, starting with when Ibn Saud simultaneously used force and diplomacy with tribal and religious authorities to combat the Ikhwan, an armed coalition rebelling against the state.¹¹ This dual-pronged strategy has persisted. In the Arab Spring, for example, the regime simultaneously detained protestors, co-opted clerics from the Shia opposition, and announced \$93 billion in social spending to win over its citizens in the first month after the collapse of Mubarak's regime in Egypt.¹²

As an oil-rich state, Saudi Arabia is well resourced to pursue co-optation. Today, two-thirds of all Saudis in the workforce are government employees, and the government heavily subsidizes everything from housing to health care.¹³ Because Saudis rely so heavily on the government for economic security, they are often reluctant to voice their concerns loudly about the state's direction or vision. Family and friends tend to discourage vocal opposition—partly out of concern for the individual and partly out of their own self-interest. Individuals whom the state considers to be adversarial often face harsh consequences.

The boundaries of permissible discourse are especially restrictive for issues such as national security. In the first centuries of the Al Saud family's rule, before the creation of the modern Saudi state, national security was limited to the family's efforts to unify the Arabian Peninsula. In that context, it often treated internal dissent as a national security threat.¹⁴ As growing oil wealth caused Saudi Arabia to develop an increasingly sophisticated set of international relations, the focus on keeping things secure on the home front persisted. In the aftermath of the Arab Spring, and amid efforts to implement the kingdom's ambitious Vision 2030 plan, Saudi Arabia continues to see domestic security—and public quiescence—as an ongoing strategic concern. As a result, there is very little public debate on

the kingdom's international ties. Commentary tends to strongly support government initiatives while being deeply critical of the government's perceived adversaries.

The lack of public debate on national security issues reflects Saudi Arabia's deeply entrenched governance model in which power is tightly held by a select few, with minimal public oversight. As with most issues in the kingdom, high-ranking government officials—often members of the royal family—decide national security concerns behind closed doors, with little to no input from the public. These are considered “sovereignty issues” that are solely at the discretion of the ruler.

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Personalistic leadership shapes Saudi Arabia's national discourse, which in turn empowers—and constrains—the kingdom's geopolitical position. On one hand, Saudi Arabia's avowedly top-down system has tended to limit governmental capacity, as underlings are wary of being perceived as being on the wrong side of either current or future policies. The structure tends to reinforce groupthink, and it discourages a rigorous evaluation of alternative strategies. It also tends to suppress innovations and initiatives that could complement government strategies to the benefit of the state. However, Saudi Arabia's top-down system also creates agility. Policies that are prioritized can be implemented swiftly and consistently.¹⁵

ECONOMICS

There is a growing perception among Saudis that the kingdom has not been maximizing its economic potential. While the country's economic growth in the twentieth century was breathtaking by any measure, the ingredients for that growth were not sustainable for the twenty-first century. The leadership has been frank that decades of policies that promised government employment to Saudi nationals, over-relied on foreign workers, inhibited women's work-

force participation, and nurtured cumbersome patronage networks were no longer fit for purpose. Its most obvious response was Vision 2030.

The kingdom has had 10 development plans—each focusing on the need for economic diversification—and none were considered successful.¹⁶ From its launch in 2016, Vision 2030 has sought to be different. It is more ambitious, more disruptive, and more elaborate than anything before it, and it has more money behind it. It is comprehensive, too, with a sophisticated engagement campaign that is especially targeted at women and young people and blankets the media, schools, and almost every aspect of public life. With Vision 2030—conceptualized in partnership with global consulting firms like McKinsey and Boston Consulting Group and executed with an even larger array of outside partners—the Saudi leadership has devised more than a dozen “vision realization programs” and a “national transformation plan” that addresses 37 objectives across eight themes, measured initially through 92 main key performance indicators (KPIs) and 224 sub-KPIs implemented through 433 initiatives and projects.¹⁷ Those numbers have only grown since the plan’s inception.

One of the economic engines behind Vision 2030 is the revitalized Public Investment Fund (PIF), which has grown to hold almost \$1 trillion in assets. MBS is the chairman, and his close associate Yasser al-Rumayyan serves as governor. The PIF is avowedly aligned with advancing the goals of Vision 2030, and it is investing hundreds of billions of dollars in domestic enterprises that are intended to boost the kingdom’s economic diversification. But the PIF has also been an important source of Saudi outward investment, buying high-profile assets such as international sports teams and leagues and investing in major multinational companies such as Uber and Electronic Arts.

The nationalization of the workforce, often referred to as “Saudization,” has been another cornerstone of the kingdom’s economic strategy. Implemented primarily through the Nitaqat program, the results have been mixed but promising. Following the Arab Spring, over 80 percent of Saudi Arabia’s private sector workforce consisted of foreign labor, and its unemployment rate was one of the highest in the world, at 12.7 percent in 2017.¹⁸ Since then, the government has tried to address this issue by imposing quotas, applying levies on expatriates, and subsidizing the employment of Saudi nationals. By the end of 2022, the

unemployment rate was 8 percent, and more than 277,000 Saudis joined the labor market that year, reaching 80 percent of the state’s initial target.¹⁹ While the kingdom is still far from possessing a predominantly Saudi workforce, the gradual gains bode well.

In preparation for its transition to alternative energy sources, Vision 2030 redefines Saudi Arabia’s economic relationships with great powers. Of course, oil is still a critical aspect of Saudi trade relationships. China is the country’s largest oil export market, and the kingdom’s strategic collaboration with Russia over oil production remains vital to Saudi economic interests. Beyond oil, however, Saudi Arabia is interested in using foreign direct investment from great powers to secure economic growth, innovation, and enhanced human capital. China is the kingdom’s most active foreign investor, accounting for 58 percent of new business investments in 2023, signaling a shift toward stronger Sino-Saudi economic collaboration.²⁰ The United States is the second-largest source of foreign investment, and the Saudi sovereign wealth fund has its most significant investments in U.S. stocks.²¹

Additionally, MBS is leveraging the country’s ties with great powers to foster innovation. While actively pursuing a U.S.-Saudi deal on civil nuclear cooperation, the kingdom is also considering bids from China, France, and Russia to build a nuclear power station.²² Saudi Arabia sees this multipronged approach as vital to securing the technological and economic advancements necessary for navigating the energy transition.

As part of its more assertive foreign policy, Saudi Arabia is also seeking to establish itself as an economic hub of the Global South. Aramco CEO Amin Nasser estimates that that by 2050, 80 percent of hydrocarbon demand will come from the Global South. As a consequence, Saudi Arabia is focusing especially on strengthening ties with states in Africa and South Asia.²³ In 2023, MBS pledged to invest \$25 billion in African states by 2030 in sectors such as clean energy, climate, and counterterrorism, demonstrating a desire to become an indispensable partner to states in the Global South.²⁴ The kingdom’s plans to draw top-level talent from other states—and its ambitious mega-projects like NEOM, a futuristic regional project whose estimated costs may top \$1 trillion—suggest a broader Saudi ambition to become a leader of the new global order.²⁵

Economic diversification is beginning to yield fruit in Saudi Arabia. With an expansion of petrochemical exports

and tourism, oil accounted for only 73 percent of Saudi Arabia's total exports in 2023, well below the 84 percent average in 2012-2013.²⁶ Even so, government revenue is still closely linked to the oil market, and falling oil prices drive up borrowing needs. The International Monetary Fund estimates that Saudi Arabia needs oil prices of almost \$91 per barrel to balance its budget, and in April 2025, oil traders forecasted prices of just under \$70 per barrel for the rest of the year.²⁷ As a consequence, Saudi Arabia's projected budget deficit in 2026 is almost 4 percent of GDP, up from the 1.6 percent of GDP that the government had initially projected for 2024.²⁸ The kingdom's debt-to-GDP ratio remains quite healthy, however, and bond offerings have been snapped up in international markets.

GREAT POWER COMPETITION

In recent years, Saudi Arabia's ties to the United States have been volatile. Although President Biden did not follow through on his 2019 campaign promise to treat Saudi Arabia as a "pariah" following the 2018 murder of journalist and U.S. resident Jamal Khashoggi, leaders on both sides wondered whether the long partnership between the United States and Saudi Arabia was about to enter a profoundly different phase. Saudi Arabia was looking for U.S. partnership and protection as it embarked on the most dramatic transformation in the country's history; instead, it found circumspection and disapproval. The Biden administration was committed to reducing the U.S. military footprint in the Middle East, and increasing intimacy with an oil producer whose human rights record (both at home and in its conduct of a war in neighboring Yemen) distressed many Americans and made little sense to U.S. government officials.

Saudi Arabia's initial response was to diversify its international relationships. According to a 2020 Washington Institute poll, 49 percent of Saudis agreed at least somewhat that they could not rely on the United States and that the kingdom should look more to Russia or China as partners.²⁹ Two years later, 61 percent of Saudis agreed with that statement.³⁰ Also in the 2022 poll, the Saudi public ranked China and Russia higher than the United States in terms of perceived importance for the first time since these polls began nearly a decade ago.³¹ One should read those numbers not as pressure on the government to diversify its ties so much as the public's response to official discourse on the country's geopolitical orientation.

China's no-strings-attached approach and its aspirational economic model appeal to Saudi ambitions, particularly in the context of Vision 2030.

In response to a chill in the U.S. relationship, Saudi Arabia supplemented its long-standing dependence on Washington with closer bilateral ties to China and Russia. China offers the kingdom substantial benefits across the energy, technology, economic, and defense sectors. In addition to being the largest consumer of Saudi oil, China facilitates strategic technology transfers related to artificial intelligence, 5G networks, and surveillance hardware.³² It also provides military capabilities that the United States has been reluctant to offer due to fear of civilian casualties in Yemen.³³ Moreover, China's no-strings-attached approach and its aspirational economic model appeal to Saudi ambitions, particularly in the context of Vision 2030.

Similarly, Saudi Arabia enhanced its collaboration with Russia, viewing the current regime as less threatening than the communist Soviet Union. Although Riyadh's relationship with Moscow is more nascent than its ties to Beijing, the two states cooperate on oil production limits through OPEC+. Additionally, the two countries have strengthened their defense relationship through arms deals and a joint military cooperation agreement.³⁴ By fostering closer ties with Russia, Saudi Arabia also has the strategic benefit of winning over one of the only states that can keep Iran in check.

It is worth noting that the Biden administration did not remain estranged from Saudi Arabia. Intent on blocking China's advance into the Persian Gulf, while similarly eager to advance Saudi-Israeli diplomatic normalization to tamp down a slew of burgeoning regional conflicts, Washington quickly came to see Riyadh as a vital regional partner. The advent of the Trump administration has drawn the United States and Saudi Arabia closer still. President Trump's commitment to non-interference in the domestic affairs of allies and partners, his hostility to the climate commitments of the Biden administration, his apparent personal warmth toward MBS and some of his closest associates, and his open desire for trade and investment with the kingdom have raised Saudi expectations. Saudi Arabia has perceived Trump's decision to use the country as a venue

for high-profile negotiations over a potential end to the Russia-Ukraine war as a validation of the kingdom's elevated status, and it came as a bright spot amid news that the leadership would have to slow some of its most ambitious economic plans due to declining revenues.

VISIONS OF A NEW GLOBAL ORDER

Saudi Arabia strategically engages in multilateral institutions to improve its image and advance its interests. In recent years, Riyadh smoothed over internal disputes within the Gulf Cooperation Council, and King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al-Saud declared that “promoting peace” is one of Saudi Arabia’s primary foreign policy goals at the UN General Assembly.³⁵ By rebranding as a peacemaker, Saudi Arabia attempts to project itself as a regional leader, not a destabilizing force. An improved reputation in multilateral forums helps advance Saudi interests because more states are willing to collaborate with the kingdom.

However, Saudi Arabia is careful to ensure that its multilateral engagement advances its narrow self-interests rather than strengthens an international order that might constrain its sovereignty. It does so in several ways. Historically, the kingdom has sought to co-opt international groupings and resist demands which it sees as constraining Saudi action. For example, on numerous occasions, Saudi Arabia ignored UN calls to lift blockades and allow humanitarian access into Yemen, out of fear that this would strengthen its Houthi opponents.³⁶ Even more recently, the kingdom executed 81 individuals in one day—many for vaguely worded offenses—despite UN pleas for a moratorium on the death penalty and demands for fair trials.³⁷ While Saudi leaders have prioritized protecting the country’s sovereignty, the government has simultaneously found ways to burnish its international image. For example, Saudi Arabia has been an increasingly visible participant in G20 summits, assuming the presidency of the grouping in 2019–20. In September 2023, Saudi Arabia worked to ensure that the renewable energy section of the New Delhi Leaders’ Declaration did not commit to a phase-out of fossil fuels, thereby protecting its long-term economic interests.³⁸

Riyadh has also associated itself with broad multilateral efforts that signal a desire to reform international institutions without directly challenging them. It has expressed interest in reforming institutions like the UN Security Council to be more representative of the current

global order, and it joined the Shanghai Cooperation Organization as a dialogue partner.³⁹ It has been circumspect about joining the BRICS as a full member, however, for fear of becoming a pawn in great power politics.⁴⁰

In the Saudi vision of a new global order, there is space for both multilateralism and ad hoc bilateral ties—especially with the Global South.

Meanwhile, Saudi Arabia is taking the lead in newer multilateral forums where it can win over other emerging powers. For example, at a New Africa Summit in Riyadh in November 2024, the Saudi finance minister announced plans to raise \$41 billion in investments and financing for sub-Saharan African nations and announced that Gulf development banks were preparing an additional \$50 billion in loans to the region by 2030.⁴¹ While Qatar and the United Arab Emirates have spread influence quickly across Africa, Saudi Arabia has been more calculating, relying on its size and weight to build partnerships that win support for Saudi Arabia’s other reputational projects, such as hosting Expo 2030 and the 2034 World Cup. In the Saudi vision of a new global order, there is space for both multilateralism and ad hoc bilateral ties—especially with the Global South. Despite its human rights record, potential partners view the kingdom favorably. According to an Arab Barometer poll across 10 countries in the Middle East and North Africa, only Palestinians and Lebanese reported a noticeably unfavorable view of Saudi Arabia, likely due to its normalization efforts with Israel and regional competition with Iran.⁴² In part, the kingdom’s popularity may be due to its ability to provide win-win relationships without the influence of great powers. Its key relationships with countries like India, Pakistan, and various African states are driven by a mix of economic interests, strategic security needs, and geopolitical aspirations. These ad hoc bilateral relationships are built on mutual gains, not conditionalities.

CONCLUSION

Guided by Vision 2030, Saudi Arabia is diversifying its economy just as much as its diplomatic relationships. While the

world transitions to alternative energy sources, the kingdom looks toward the Global South to forge partnerships that can outlast the dwindling oil supplies of regional competitors. As a key player in new and existing international institutions, the kingdom fosters multilateral and bilateral relationships centered around mutual interests rather than stipulations. Saudi Arabia seeks to advance new relationships while preserving old ones, maneuvering to a position of greater centrality in world affairs.

In a departure from its historic diplomatic caution, Saudi Arabia has been leveraging great power competition ambitiously to advance its national interests. This shift in strategic culture is not just about seeking protection from external threats; it is also about shaping a new global order that is conducive to Saudi aspirations. Rather than relying on a single relationship, the kingdom engages with the United States, China, and Russia to fulfill different strategic needs. To maintain close ties with Saudi Arabia, the United States must identify and strengthen areas in which it retains a competitive advantage over its global adversaries, with particular emphasis on defense capabilities and human capital. If the United States fails to engage the kingdom on its own terms, it risks falling behind as Russia, China, and a host of “middle powers” vie for relevance in the Gulf.

Ultimately, Saudi Arabia envisions a new global order in which it is recognized as a partner rather than a subordinate. So far, the kingdom’s assertive policy has largely paid off. For almost a decade, MBS has been navigating the country through an impending energy transition, increasing multipolarity, and great power competition with gradual success. However, Saudi Arabia does not aim merely to endure the current geopolitical landscape: The kingdom’s strategic vision strives to shape a new global order defined by self-interest, ad hoc partnerships, and indispensable Saudi leadership. ■

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